"On Truth and Lying" in a Literary Sense: Thinking or Tinkering?

Carla Locatelli
Department of Psychology and Cognitive Science,
University of Trento
Corso Bettini, 84 –38068 Rovereto (Tn), Italy
Email: carla.locatelli@unitn.it

Abstract:

Starting from Nietzsche's notion of "truth and lying in a non moral sense" the essay develops a historical inquiry into the definitions of literature in relation to the possibility of literary errors and mistakes. The historical shift in hermeneutics from text to reading highlights the epistemological valorization of literature as a source of knowledge potentially susceptible to error and mistakes. Through the contributions of many writers and philosophers concerned with the truth of literary knowledge, a recurrent cognitive apprehension about literature is outlined, taking into consideration a long variety of different formulations, from Plato to Aristotle, from Bacon to Sidney, from the Romantics to the Formalists, and from Barthes to Derrida, and beyond. Their contributions highlight the ever-changing *loci* of error from text to reception, from hermeneutics to readability. They also help in defining the disciplinary boundaries that would differentiate literary texts from scientific ones.

Keywords: errors and mistakes, fictional worlds, disciplinary knowledge, co(n)texts, textual implications, readability, semiosis, history of literary cognition.

1. Errors and Mistakes: Cognitive Fables and Reliable Knowledge

The obvious allusion in my title refers to a well-known, and crucially transformative work: Nietzsche's *On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense* (Nietzsche 1999, 139-153), plausibly a work of philosophy, but actually a work of literature, if 'literature' is taken as it has been interpreted by several theorists in the Twentieth Century, who maintained that there is no "essence of Literature" (with a capital "L")[1].

In this essay, I will highlight a genealogy of disciplinary valorizations that, in time, have indicated the occurrence of errors and mistakes. I intend to delineate a critical history of epistemological concerns and priorities, with inevitable omissions, but with the intent of producing a global mosaic of error location.

Nietzsche implies the notions of "truth" and "lying" as far-reaching conceptions, inasmuch as he describes the human advent and development of cognition as the production of "a fable", normally understood as a literary fiction. Nietzsche's "genesis story" of cognition qualifies the development of knowledge as a "fable", i.e., a work of "literature" (a "fiction"), distinct from philosophy and positive science, understood at his time as purveyors of objective "truth":

> In some remote corner of the universe, flickering in the light of the countless solar systems into which it had been poured, there was once a planet on which clever animals invented cognition. It was the most arrogant and most mendacious minute in the 'history of the world' (...) Someone could invent a fable like this and yet they would still not have given a satisfactory illustration of just how pitiful, how insubstantial and transitory, how purposeless and arbitrary the human intellect looks within nature; (...) For this intellect has no further mission that might extend beyond the bounds of human life. (Nietzsche 1999, 141)

Given that human intellect does not "extend beyond the bounds of human life", it is important for the present concern of my argument to highlight the fact that in Nietzsche knowledge and error are born together, since "cognition" is defined as "most arrogant and most mendacious", and "insubstantial and transitory". As I said, it is also interesting to notice that Nietzsche calls his own anthropological and cognitive chronicling a "fable". Why a "fable"? Is it because humans can only produce supposedly fallible accounts such as fables (to be understood as fabrications, fibs, and "untruths")?

We cannot forget that the "fables" grown in an ancient Aesop tradition were some sort of archetypal models of narratives, providing valuable knowledge, mostly of the moral and psychological kind. This would imply that Nietzsche's allusion becomes a sort of tongue-in-cheek suggestion: i.e., I am teaching you some truth (philosophical, moral and cognitive), by way of an untruth (a fable). I suggest that this can actually be, epistemologically, the very role of Literature in the construction of knowledge, with obvious consequences on defining its "erring" potential.

Nietzsche, certainly not in fear of the academic disputations he met throughout his life, confirms through his valorization of the literary genre "fable" his substantially metaphorical conception of human cognition. He purports that, ultimately, illustration of "reality" is a human fabrication, if not a plain forgery, in which "the human intellect" marks its "mission", but only within "the bounds of human life", so in no way attaining an absolute truth. In the development of human knowledge, there is no complete "satisfactory illustration": there is no totalizing text of truth. What is at stake for Nietzsche is no less than the human knowledge-potential itself, an issue formulated soon afterward, as an explicit question: "What do human beings really know about themselves?" (Nietzsche 1999, 142) In answering this question, Nietzsche highlights the ineliminable work of "metaphors we live by" (see: Lakoff 2003; De Man 1979; De Man 1984). According to him, naming is the first metaphor, which means that any knowledge is rooted in its metaphorical state: "we possess only metaphors of things which in no way correspond to the original entities" (Nietzsche 1999, 144).

In recent times, Jacques Derrida has discussed this Nietzschean presupposition (Derrida 1974, 5-74), and, in a much less radical statement, also Theodor Brown has emphasized the fact that different disciplines produce "different views of a particular problem" on the basis of "the prevailing metaphors held by each discipline." (Brown 2003, x)

So, the idea that metaphors determine both an economy of knowing and a statute of knowledge is progressively accepted in the evolution of some forms of contemporary epistemology. The inevitability of metaphors ultimately provides space for errors and mistakes, but it is also an important condition for knowledge production and knowledge\transformation: "Every concept comes into being by making equivalent that which is non-equivalent. Just as it is certain that no leaf is exactly the same as any other leaf, it is equally certain that the concept 'leaf' is formed by dropping these individual differences arbitrarily" (Nietzsche 1999, 145). As a matter of fact, in Nietzsche's essay we find far-reaching preoccupations which were later to become those of a contemporary epistemology after the so-called "linguistic turn", a "turn" affecting all fields of knowledge, and redefining the relationship of philosophy and literature, as well as their relation to "science". Language remains a basic component at the root of any conception of "literature" (be it literary, philosophical or techno-scientific), but at the level of narration, things change: narrations have different purposes and different determinations. The history of techno-science produces literary sequels in a non-ending sequence, in the pursuit of the truth value of their statements. The history of Literature, on the contrary, produces "non sequitur" sequels; literary narrations finish with themselves, even when they survive as imitation, parody or even quotation.

Thus, only a comparative discursivity, i.e., a comparison attentive to the variations of naming and purpose in different texts and disciplines (all grown on different naming-metaphors), can eventually differentiate knowledge domains, and perhaps reduce error through a sort of reciprocal interdisciplinary checking.

On the other hand, is the birth of "disciplines" merely the result of a drive to distinguish and order which represses its own metaphorical statute in the interest of establishing control?

The very definition of "discipline" (as control of a field of knowledge), implies today a regulatory self-defining statute, with boundaries that were unknown to the "natural philosopher" (i.e., the literary and philosophical scientists), up to the Modern Age, when philosophy, science and poetry co-existed in the same pre-modern texts. Think, for example, of the pre-Socratic philosophers, Plato's *Republic*, Lucretius' *The Nature of Things*, and Dante's *Divine Comedy*. It is only with the 17th Century advent of "the scientific method" that the introduction of a theorization of the "two cultures", which dichotomizes the humanities and the technical sciences, that a repression of the shared metaphorical statute characterizing both of them achieves its controlling disciplinary power (Snow 1993; Fukuyama 1992; Fukuyama 2002). The opposition of "plain style" and "fanciful use of language" goes back to the Sophists and Plato, but is radicalized in the scientific revolution of Seventeenth-Century Europe.

The subsequent question in relation to "errors" can be formulated as follows: "could the cognitive practice of 'discipline and punish' create specific territories of irrefutable error definition?" Michel Foucault has highlighted how disciplinary knowledge is closely related to power and produces outcomes that arbitrarily define human reality. What follows is that a single discipline is

insufficient to define unquestionable truths and that a discipline might even prosper on the blindness of its own limits and errors.

Is there a way out of disciplinary blindness? Perhaps only interdisciplinary outcomes, taken as evidence, can produce the contingent truth on a problematic matter (Foucault 1972; Foucault 2002; Agazzi, Giannetto and Giudice 2010).

Can interdisciplinarity provide an undisputable resistance to strictly disciplinary errors? Would a "system" of human knowledge that determines errors beyond the difference of disciplines (i.e., of particular systems of knowledge) be able to reduce epistemological errors to mere disciplinary mistakes? If so, the disciplinary error would be "just" a miscalculation or an oversight, not deeply affecting the potential of human knowledge. On the other hand, could the above questions be just a utopian articulation of a hermeneutics of suspicion?

Would interdisciplinarity make errors eventually correctible within the disciplines from which they originated, or would it multiply error by way of trans-disciplinary contagion? The history of human knowledge has witnessed the realization of both possibilities (Locatelli 2017, 31-44). Given that disciplinary fields influence each other because of citationality and translation from one discipline to another, would it be possible that trans-ductions in the pursuit of knowledge multiply disciplinary mistakes? For example, I am thinking, of the translation of Darwin's theory of "the survival of the fittest" into the socio-political system of "Darwinism", because of a rendition of one field of knowledge into another: from comparative anatomy to sociology, which eventually came to legitimize "the survival of the fittest" in political science as a "rationale" for discrimination. Also, the viral production of "fake news" is relevant in this respect.

Is there a regulative remedy in/for translations? Could the global economy of the information system, intrinsically foster error-elimination, or/and error-reduction? And, at what conditions could a "global system" of human knowledge exist, in order to perform error-avoidance?

A "global knowledge system" can only be posited as the result of a conceptual hypothesis, but then, how accountable could the logic of such a system be?

In addressing these questions, we should remember that metaphorical structure and potential referential slippage would be a constituent part of the system itself (starting with the "first metaphor of naming"), and, more importantly, that the transformative possibility of the system must be foreseen and calculated in order to be accountable, in the incessant transformation of knowledge. In short: the "global system" must avoid closure and the errors it entails.

Furthermore, even admitting that such a global system "works", how could it perform its regulatory function (both epistemological and ethical) with effective agency? And on behalf of what power?

Demagogy indicates that political information guarantees an effective but often misleading and unfair sharing of knowledge since it does not take into account cultural and intersectional differences on matters of naming and (variable) agency. This political issue about the power of information (in the double sense of the genitive, i.e. the semantic power that information has in

itself, and the performative power it exerts), brings up a concluding ethical question: at what condition of agency should a "global knowledge system" be desirable?

2. Errors and Mistakes: Where is the Difference? What are the Consequences?

The distinction between "errors" and "mistakes" is challenging, not only because of disciplinary and trans-disciplinary determinations but because of a general semantic overlapping of the two terms, mapped out and recurring in dictionaries and glossaries of different languages. For example, the definitions of "error" and "mistake" are semantically overlying in the canonic definitions of the O.E.D and in the Treccani Encyclopedia[2], two authoritative and accredited reference sources of the Eurocentric world. Repeatedly, various Dictionaries and Glossaries conflate semantic meanings in their diachronically changeable mappings, and it is only in a heuristic attempt at clarification that I quote here the synthetic and valuable distinction between "errors" and "mistakes" made by Mariacarla Gadebush Bondio and Agostino Paravicini Bagliani, who take into consideration differences expressed in three current European languages: German, French and Italian: "Errors (Ger. *Irrtum*, Fr. *erreur*, It. *Errore*) are false lines of thought in the process of getting knowledge, whereas mistakes, or malpractice (Ger. *Fehler/Kunstfehler*, Fr. *faute*, It. *Fallo/svista*), are failed actions arising due to inattention, chance or clumsiness" (Bondio and Bagliani 2012, VII).

While appreciating this familiarizing cognitive map, because of a multilingual semantic distinction unknown to many others, I still wonder: are "false lines of thought" very different from "inattention, chance or clumsiness?" Or is the difference between errors and mistakes to be put in terms of "thought *vs.* action"? But, after all, how do "lines of thought develop" if not through "actions" (such as re-thinking, reading and talking)? If so, the development of "lines of thought" would not be guaranteed as free from "inattention, chance or clumsiness" which are here attributed to "failed actions".

"Lines of thought" develop through cognitive actions; but who establishes what "*failed* actions" are? Some so-called "failings", succeed later, and ultimately, they do not count as "failed actions" anymore. So, the very distinction of "error" and "mistakes" implies the complexities of performativity and agency (diachronic, and cultural) that their semantic definitions do not possibly acknowledge.

Furthermore: are "lines of thought" always unrelated to "chance"? At times "inattention" or "distraction" have been a source of deviant ways of thinking, originating new findings. In this case, the "mistaken" thinking process can be considered as a "happy chance," a *felix culpa*.

In time, one could exemplify how "errors and mistakes" have been defined according to different cultural epistemologies, and diverse "world pictures", but basically, in the Eurocentric world, all of them recurrently focus on the relation between "words and things" ("*res et verba*"). Within the field of these epistemological and cognitive issues, we should question if the economy of error-making is different in characterizing moral behavior, a concern that deserves the attention this short essay cannot address in depth.

By way of an early example of the "words/things" focus in the Eurocentric tradition, I will mention Strato of Lampsacus (328 BCE- 268 BCE), defined as a "physicus" by authors from Diogenes Laertius to Cicero, and in times closer to us, usually known because of Leopardi's mention of him. Strato of Lampsacus was among the first to indicate that the occurrence of "error" depends on a linguistic issue. According to him, thought depends on the senses, and their determination of things (right or wrong) depends on language (Desclos and Fortenbaugh 2012).

Certainly, Plato's *Phaedrus* (370 B.C.E) and Aristotle's *Poetics* (ca.330 B.C.E), with their emphasis on human cognitive needs, highlight the fact that "Representation is natural to human beings from childhood. They differ from the other animals in this: man tends most towards representation and learns his first lessons through representation" (Aristotle 1987, 4), and *Phaedrus* underscores the fact that "words bear a seed from which other words grow in other environments. This makes them capable of giving everlasting life to the original seed" (Plato 2002, 72). Thus linguistic questions are opened: (how) can one distinguish good from bad representations? And, when "words grow in other environments", on what basis can we define good and bad statements and depictions? Is there a way to preserve "the original seed"? And, is there a method, or at least a device to distinguish good and bad accounts, so as to prevent the mis-use of words which would produce the dissemination of error and mistakes in the spreading of communication in every direction and through multiple media?

Furthermore, on a different level, are the performance and the logic of error-making different, in characterizing cognitive *vs.* moral behavior? These are intertwined issues (epistemological and ethical), which become very relevant with historic hindsight, looking at how both cognitive and moral behavior have been celebrated or sanctioned. Think, for example of Galileo Galilei's dispute with the Inquisition, and of the controversial and contradictory understanding of "homosexuality" from Greek times to this day.

3. The Old Story of 'Fake News' Dissemination

The spreading of 'fake news' is not a recent phenomenon but is as old as Plato, at least. For him it was an issue of sharing information with "inappropriate people" who then produced "fake news" because of their misreadings; what follows is an issue that, still valid today, challenges the very possibility of evaluating and filtering information, so as to distinguish the good news from the bad ones.

Can the addressees be the discriminating agent in establishing error? Are cultural probability and consensus the only determining "factors of truth" in the information world? Plato's *Phaedrus* has addressed the issue, and suggested that even wrong readers construct the "truths" of what they are reading in a text:

Once any account has been written down, you find it all over the place, hobnobbing with completely inappropriate people no less than with those who understand it, and completely failing to know who it should and shouldn't talk to (Plato 2002, 70).

This statement provides a turning point in the definition of errors because:
1) "The account" itself is no longer an inert object but takes on agency: it is personified; the account itself is "hobnobbing" and "fails to know".

In today's world we are aware of the account's agency because of the fact that news create reality, and do not simply report or describe it.
2) Within a contemporary communication model, the "account" is found "all over the place." It is hardly necessary to indicate that the "place" today includes the World Wide Web, or should we say "*wild* world web"?
3) The message, in spite of its agency, cannot totally choose its addressees; it is "completely failing to know who it should and shouldn't talk to".

Thus, the written "account" is a failed agent, which produces error because it has no full control of the addressees. Plato does not question its truth-content but its vulnerability: it is subject to error inasmuch as it fails to know and chose whom it should selectively address; the addressee is an uncontrollable factor.

Writing as opposed to orality seemed to be the source of error for Plato, even if such an opposition has been deconstructed and profoundly challenged today. Plato says: "once the account has been written down", the addressee becomes the primary source of error, and the message loses its empowered agency.[3] The inevitable dislocation of any written "account" (i.e., the ubiquity of its being found "all over the place"), is the major source of interpretative error. Plato maintains that the iterability of written signs and of cited messages is the culprit of potential error, in different *co(n)texts*.[4]

And yet, at the same time, if signs were not repeatable, there would be no human communication at all, neither written nor oral, and that is a price much too high to pay, *vis à vis* the risk of spreading errors and mistakes due to the spreading of the (written) "account" to unworthy addressees.

Any kind of literature can indisputably be interpreted by different addresses, and some are "inappropriate people" (including, for example, those who cannot interpret instructions for installing a washing machine). The possibility of errors is multiplied by the structural feature of the linguistic iterability of an "account" likely to fall in the hands of many.[5] "Inappropriate people" ignore a disciplinary content (the co-texts), that would correctly place the "account" (the text) in an adequate line of reading; the co(n)textual semantic, discursive and pragmatic determination can always be (dis)regarded by the "unsuitable reader". For example, this may happen moving poetic texts to scientific accounts, or moving Sacred Texts from liturgical use to literary fruition.

At any rate, what seems particularly relevant today is the development of an epistemological concern in defining error, no longer linked to the successful unveiling of some truth, but as a pernicious production of truths. These are crucial issues at stake also when inquiring whether or not "Literature" can err or just make mistakes.

4. The Literary Domain: A Suggested Map of Errors and Mistakes

As I have mentioned earlier in this essay, the Twentieth Century has devoted a lot of thinking to the definition of "literature" (with or without a capital "L"); for example, Roland Barthes has underscored the fact that "Literature" (with a capital "L") is a bourgeois "mythology", comparable to the "Fashion System", and Jacques Derrida has underlined the fact that all texts are "literature" (with a small "l") because they depend on language (Barthes 2012, Derrida 1986). As I said earlier, all texts, including those of the "hard sciences", share an inevitable linguistic denominator, as Nietzsche had pointed out by saying that they share the linguistic condition of "naming".

However, neither Barthes' socio-semiotic considerations nor Derrida's epistemological reflections thematize the specificity of "Literature's lies", i.e., the source of errors and mistakes, which was a major concern in both the Greek and Latin cultural backgrounds and was majorly addressed by scholars and artists throughout the Eurocentric Humanist tradition.

Among these humanists, Bacon is an obvious authority since in his *De Dignitate*, an expansion of *De Agumentis Scientiarum* (i.e., *The Advancement of Learning*), he indicates History, Poetry, and Philosophy as three fundamental disciplinary types of knowledge, susceptible of being interrogated because of their potential for errors of demonstration, or creation of false information (Bacon 1974; Bacon 2010). He has been extensively concerned with error(s), and it may be worth recalling at length some of his observations, in spite of the fact that they are quite known, because I will interpret them in relation to the present. As a matter of fact, his meditations are still central to a contemporary discussion of errors and mistakes, inasmuch as they establish a cognitive shift from a search of knowledge for a purely speculative sake, to a search for a beneficial knowledge for humans.

Bacon's pervasive concern about false notions is not simply aimed ad debunking Aristotle's *Organon* by conceiving his *Novum Organum* (*The New Organon or True Directions Concerning the Interpretation of Nature*,1620), but he purports to focus on the obstacles in the process of pursuing a *useful* knowledge (Bacon 1994, 53-56) . Thus, Bacon exposes different forms of fallacious reasoning, i.e., a variety of mistaken and erroneous ways of clinging to, or developing, false notions. He calls these types of humanly ingrained and cultural errors "*idola*" (i.e., notions lacking demonstration), and he enumerates some major ones: 1) *idola tribus*; 2) *idola specus*; 3) *idola fori*; 4) idola *theatri*." Each of them deserves a much broader elucidation than the one allowed in this essay, but we could say synthetically that they concern respectively:

1) *"The idols of the tribe"* which "lie deep in human nature itself (...) For it is wrongly asserted that the human sense is the measure of things". In modern terms we would probably highlight intrinsic cognitive blindness as a source of error, given that the notion of "human nature" is no longer sound today;

2) *"The idols of the cave"* which "are those specific to individual men", being linked to their peculiar taste or personal training, including unverified reverence for authority. A loss of sight beyond the immediately personal knowledge and belief system makes humans content with their ignorance, so that they will not get out of their Platonic cave (i.e., their set and restraining prejudices).

Even today, the danger here has to do with accepting the limits of the investigation of reality dictated by pre-emptive disciplinary boundaries and personal preference and preparation. By way of an example, Bacon calls into question the conflation of human and divine notions as epitomized in Pythagoras and Aristotle. Unfortunately, the danger of such a pre-judicial error leads to fanaticism caused by a misunderstanding, still present in today's world;

3) *"The Idols of the Market-place"* which regard errors performed in human interaction and are due to linguistic vagueness and incongruity: "For speech is the means of association among men; but words are applied according to common understanding. And in consequence, a wrong and inappropriate application of words obstructs the mind to a remarkable extent." (Bacon 1994, 55) According to Bacon, the cause of error can originate both in "common understanding" inappropriately applied and in a disciplinary use of language, which could name things that do not exist, or apply mere guessed qualities to existing things, thus leading "men into innumerable controversies and fictions.";

4) *"The Idols of the Theater"*, i.e., system errors, "which have crept into human minds from the various dogmas of philosophies, and also from faulty laws of demonstration." It is worth noticing that Bacon does not distinguish here philosophy from Literature or science:

I regard all the philosophies that have been received or invented as so many stage plays creating fictitious and imaginary worlds. (...) Nor again do I mean this only in regard to universal philosophies, but also to many principles and axioms of the sciences, which have become established through tradition, credulity and neglect (Bacon 1994, 56).

The problem highlighted here regards the process of knowledge-acquisition, which is severely faulty if determined by the adherence to any unchecked (by experimental verification) representations of reality. Philosophical systems (referring to non existing worlds given as real), and scientific principles (established only by tradition) produce errors when they represent reality without indicating that they are fictional.

Aristotelian systems are predominantly under Bacon's fire, but "Poesy" is also called into question. Doesn't it create things that do not exist? So: what could possibly be the contribution of Literature to human knowledge, if any? According to Bacon, it is its elegant telling, one that makes the telling itself more desirable than the truthful telling of History in the "theater" of life-representation. "Poesy" regards what can be imagined, but not what is implied as existing; it is a decoration, beautifying something imagined but not necessarily existing in the "real" world.

I do not think that we still agree today with the notion that the cognitive value of Literature is a mere decorative function in the description of "reality". Many literary scholars and scientists maintain that there is a specific epistemological value of Literature. I will address again this crucial issue in the following paragraphs. As I have explained, according to Bacon the epistemic role of Literature is in the production of an ornate picture of *the conceivable*, not of *the real*. Thus, "literary fictions" become errors only when they are "taken for truth", even when they have no claim to truth in themselves. Ultimately, according to him, the psychological factor, i.e., the mode of reception, is

more important than the literal content of a text of Literature in determining its error potential.

As I mentioned earlier, Bacon's taxonomy connects "error" to linguistic and discursive misunderstanding associated with subjectivity and social interaction. In the case of Literature, he blames the addressee for taking as truthful something that it is not so, i.e., for accepting unverified information as "true". In short: the addressee can be a bad reader, so that he is more accountable than the text or the author because he possesses a discerning capability which could prevent literary fictions to be taken as truthful. There is some sort of similarity here with Plato's *Phaedrus*, in underlying the dimension of literary error as contextually "interpretative", even though, as we have seen, Plato's emphasis on error-potential was placed on the vagrancies of the text itself, and more specifically on textual iterability: textual repetition-dislocation produces wrong interpretations by reaching unsuitable addressees. According to Bacon, the unsuitable addressee is psychologically characterized by his ignorance of context and gratuitous inclination to rely on authority, so that there is no blame on textual iterability, but only on the readers who do not verify information.

5. From Text to Reader, and then on to Author: a Humanist Dynamics of Error Location

In addition to the mentioned drifting of focus between *text* (Plato) and *reader* (Bacon), I will recall Sir Philip Sidney's passionate *Defence of Poesy* (1580-81), because he focuses on the *author*, and "absolves" the poet's lies, on the ground of the special statute of art, as different from philosophy, theology and science:

> Now, for the poet, he nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth, for, as I take it, to lie is to affirm that to be true which is false. (...) But the poet, as I said before, never affirmeth; the poet never maketh any circles about your imagination, to conjure you to believe for true what he writes. (...) And therefore, though he recount things not true, yet because he telleth them not for true, he lieth not... (Sidney 2004, 34)

This quotation accommodates at least three crucial issues: 1) What is the meaning of the statement: "*the poet nothing affirms*"? Does Sidney suggest that literature does not produce knowledge, or that its assertions and references are not to be taken as referential statements? 2) Sidney bases his defense of the poet on the nature of a speech act: "though he recounts things not true, yet because *he telleth them not for true*, he lieth not...". The real problem here becomes: how do we know that "he telleth them for not true"? Why then can so many mistakes occur because fictions "*are* taken for true", as Bacon pointed out? 3) The poet is characterized as implicitly different from the scientist and the philosopher or the theologian who would "speak the truth" and are therefore accountable for it, in the "tribunals of truth". So: is there no truth in/of Literature?

According to Sidney, the poet is not accountable, and also not manipulative: "the poet never maketh any circles about your imagination, to conjure you to believe for true what he writes". The poet is not accountable because he "nothing affirms" and furthermore he does not "conjure you to believe for true what he writes." But: where is the evidence that he does not aim at persuading? Does

he really not "conjure you to believe"? This is indeed a problematic question, and poets and critics have taken different positions on the issue: Sophists declare their persuasive intent with pride; Plato resists the use of the ornate and bombastic as evil instruments of persuasion; most 18th Century critics and poets oppose "the metaphorical" and "effusive" as potentially misleading, but the Romantics celebrate metaphors and symbols as expansive and imaginative. It is well known that Coleridge indicates the need for a "suspension of disbelief" in the ideal reader. So, even if there is no intentional attempt to deceive on the part of the poet (but how can such an intention be proven?)[6], the definition of Literature has always dealt with its seductive and potentially fallacious powers.

6. Locating the Knowledge of Literature Today: What Errors? And what Mistakes?

In order to define what literary "errors" and/or "mistakes" can be, one should attempt to highlight further what "the knowledge of literature" is, in the double sense of the genitive, i.e., 1) as the knowledge produced by literature, and 2) as the knowledge required to access literary texts.[7]

The entire humanist tradition, still alive in the Twentieth Century, has addressed this double question: 1) does Literature provide some *specific* type of knowledge (presumably one of psycho-social-ethical value)? Would that knowledge be immune from error or from the risk of producing error? And furthermore: 2) does knowing *about* Literature constitute a valuable knowledge, and is it an instrument of *correct* knowledge-production? In other words, two types of knowledge are at stake: knowing "through" Literature and knowing "about" Literature as an object of knowledge in itself.

The answers to the first question have been traditionally affirmative in various cultures, inasmuch as Literature has been included, from the Greek and Roman times, in the curricula of students who were to be acknowledged and respected as the culturally educated, and even as the scholarly and erudite. This educational imperative implies that indeed, literature provides knowledge and, to say the least, promotes the so-called "soft skills" required in today's working world. Furthermore, the proliferation of histories of Literature (national and transnational), and of histories of Reading, as well as of histories of Criticism and Theory support this view to this day.

As for the second question, the entire hermeneutical tradition, including literary theory, is precisely a story of the implication that a greater knowledge about Literature can provide a more profound way of accessing literary and philosophical knowledge, and it can also increase our ways of knowing and feeling. The knowledge of Literature (in the double sense of the genitive) is the condition for evaluating both the depth and appropriateness of the knowledge Literature provide, as well as the condition for developing and assessing the accuracy, coherence, and effectiveness of the methods investigating it.

In this epistemological context of inquiry, it is worthwhile to remember that the definition of the "object" Literature keeps changing, and develops along many different lines of thought and educational styles, leaving the very notion of "Literature" floating, in erratic and erotic meandings (i.e., in non systemic and pleasurable wanders/wonders). Literature has been variously defined since

the early Greek times, and has been connoted with positive or negative values, which predictably affect the definition of literary "errors". However, the pleasure of Literature can hardly be reckoned as an error, unless one focuses merely on the thematic content which, in fact, has led to detections of obscenity or corruption. But the pleasure of literature is in the complex forms of its (un)veiling even the most controversial issues, and not in the didacticism of some ordinary descriptions.

As always in the history of literary knowledge, issues and values are cognitive and/or political, and, among the most stable values of Literature, pleasure occupies a prominent place, which obviously adds to the complex definition of its emphatic effects related to ethical and political knowledge in different historical periods.

In the Twentieth Century, a long and international "formalist tradition" has emphasized the "objective" (*vs.* subjective) specificity of the literary artifact (a text *ad arte factum*), as structurally different from ordinary communication. Formalism developed in order to avoid political and emphatic aspects of Literature and promoted its study as a science, with its specific object in "literariness". In1921 Roman Jakobson wrote: "The object of *the science of literature* is not literature, but literariness – that is, that which makes a given work a work of literature[8]. "Literariness" is the distinctive feature of Literature seen as an object of scientific study, and derives from specific stylistic, rhetorical syntactical, and morphological characteristics. Ignorance of these distinctive features would produce a cognitive and methodological error, which ultimately leads to reading literary communication as an ordinary, or scientific one.

Both Russian and American formalists[9] were interested in valorizing Literature as distinctively structured and separate from ordinary communication and perception. Boris Eichenbaum defines literary perception as one "in which we experience form. (...) *Perception* here is clearly not to be understood as a simple psychological concept peculiar to this or that person, but, since art does not exist outside of perception, as an element in art itself. The notion of 'form' here acquires new meaning: it is no longer an envelope, but a complete thing, something concrete, dynamic, self-contained, and without a correlative of any kind." (Eichenbaum 1926, 112) Thus, errors would be interpretative errors, not intrinsically literary ones (except in the case of an abuse of form), and would ensue from a confusion or clear separation of the "content" of a literary text from its "form", and the systemic error of criticism would be to ignore "perception of form" as the determining and distinctive feature of literary texts.

If literary form "is no longer an envelope", then the forms of literature work on the impossibility of synonyms for the content of form, but thrive on the possibilities of the forms of referential content. Given the non-translatability of form [since any paraphrase would be a "heresy" (Borooks 1947)], Literature qua "pure form" is beyond and outside error, but forms of literariness can be compared, and some can be found faulty in comparison with others. They would be "literary mistakes."

The epistemological bequest of Formalism tells us that Literature is a type of discourse distinct from other types of discourse because each one of them is structurally determined in

different ways. This legacy does not address, and thus leaves open the questions of whether or not the knowledge of literature can make "true assertions" (as well as false ones), and produce "specific truths." However, when in 1926-27, Boris Eichenbaum echoed Jakobson's presuppositions and warnings and insisted on the fact that: "the specific features of the verbal arts had to be studied (...) [*and in order*] to do so it was first necessary to sort out the *differing uses* of poetic and practical language." (Eichenbaum 1926, 115. Emphasis added) By calling "uses" into question he added a functionally cognitive perspective to the merely formalist one (which would presumably valorize only the notion of 'technique').

A focus on "the *differing uses* of poetic and practical language" highlights the particular goals and features of texts, which would distinguish techno-scientific ones from the literary ones, on the basis of a difference of discursive codes and communicative goals.

The notion of "discourse" as defined in socio-semiotics and linguistics underscores differences at the level of a structuring beyond the mere linguistic level: discourse grows on the uses of language. Nietzsche himself acknowledges the impact of a "*web* of metaphors" which differentiates texts, as the pursuit of "truth" is practiced by humans in different disciplines. Uses of language are varying, in the interest of the survival of the species.

At *the referential level*, techno-scientific discourse develops its network of metaphors in order to provide useful information; it also requires data evidence and verifiable proof for its statements. Literary and philosophical discourses release non-quantifiable and non-immediately useful information. Logical interrelations of concepts provide scientific evidence, but for the artist, the correlation of concepts does not provide proven indication, nor do such interrelations deliver immediately applicable outcomes. Science deals with data on which it bases the information it provides, in view of an applicable outcome: mathematized data (validating syntactic and semantic language-based models) support the investigations of the physical sciences, whereas Literature and philosophy (also relying on syntactic and semantic language-based models), produce non-quantitative information and do not develop through structured mathematical or formal concepts, but through symbolic narration.

Literature works on the logic of the fictional worlds it sets up, and Literature's mistakes occur only when the logic and/or the referential system internal to a fictional world-creation are violated. So, literary texts can even challenge a received and habitual concatenation of referents, because literary referents neither establish nor demonstrate the validity of evidence. However, a literary text cannot violate its own fictional logic, once a worldview is established. For example: if the story says that only purple unicorns can fly, then, pink ones cannot, and so it would be a literary mistake to say they do at some point within the same narrative. It is on the basis of wrong repetitions or disconnected anaphoras within the narrative of the fictional world that Literature can make mistakes. Given data can produce narrative mistakes only when they are not consistent with the referential system established within the fictional narrative.

In other words: Literature cannot produce verifiable error(s), but it can make mistakes when it contradicts its own referential logic and premises. This is the main proposition of my investigation, and a few more expansions will reinforce my point.

7. A Cognitive Fable: from Text to Author, to Reader, and to Reading, and then on to Readability

In recent times Roland Barthes has highlighted discursive and semiotic differences in the typology of texts, depending on their "symbolic structuring". The difference he indicates between "Work" and "Text" (in 1971) emphasizes divergences in the uses and taxonomies of textual productions: "*the Text* is that which goes to the limit of the rules of enunciation (rationality, readability etc.). (...) The logic regulating the Text is not comprehensive (...); the activity of associations, contiguities, carryings-over coincides with a liberation of symbolic energy (...); *the work* – in the best of cases – is *moderately* symbolic (its symbolic runs out, comes to a halt); the Text is *radically* symbolic: *a work conceived, perceived, and received in its integrally symbolic nature is a text*."[10] The difference between a "moderately" and "radically" symbolic text implies a tolerance for a deviance from the established rules that organize discourse according to strictly techno-scientific principles and points to an oscillation within the reassuring distinction between purely descriptive representation of "reality" and descriptions charged with symbolic meaning.

Literature produces "Texts", which is to say that: "Unlike traditional science, literature does not conceal its own fictional basis (...). Differently from science, literature displays its unverifiable assertiveness, and even flaunts the rhetorical and consensual dimension of its truth, as well as the intense symbolic energy of its discourse, and a special connection with imagination and feelings" (Locatelli 2007, 9). Indeed, the underscoring of an "unverifiable assertiveness" defines the production of Literature as a sequel of "Texts" (as defined by Barthes), i.e., as the locus of an intense discharge of "symbolic energy" acknowledging and affirming itself outside the boundaries of demonstrable and certifiable referential evidence.

Many post-structuralist theories have valorized the semiotic notion of *unlimited semiosis* (Eco, Pierce), and/or of *difference* (Derrida), as two epistemological modes of meaning-production and signification that would ultimately jeopardize the very possibility of theorizing final and "totalizing" interpretations of a literary text. What Literature "means" and "does" is open to plurality, multiplicity, and even undecidability, and thus the task of defining interpretative errors based on an unambiguous true/false foundation surfaces as the meager and ordinary result of cultural "mythologies" (Barthes).

As a matter of fact, the search of errors shifts from a traditional focusing on the referents and structures of a closed textuality to the openness of interpretation, and the ethics of reading takes the place of a precise identification of textual errors and mistakes.

In the Twentieth Century, starting with the Formalists, the issue of "textual error-potential" lost its clout, and interpretative analysis and deconstruction of referential, structural, and semiotic

meanings became a reading priority. Recent theoretical approaches to defining "literature/Literature," and finding literary errors locate them in *the readers' approach* in understanding, or failing to understand, the strife between a text's semantic assertions and the rhetoric and syntax of its complex articulation.

The deconstructionist findings also highlight the fact that the very notion of "text" is problematic, so that textual interpretation is convoked to define the *tòpos* (no longer a textual place, but a trope) of its plural understanding.

However, contrary to a superficial reception of deconstruction, the attention to linguistic *différance* and to the plurality of "centers" in a "text" did not mean that any interpretation would be acceptable, but rather that the attention to the signification potential of the non-totalizing structure of the "text" itself (however differently defined), could provide unforeseen possibilities of reading (some even contradicting the mere semantic level of the text as a given, and as traditionally interpreted).

After the above presentation and discussion on the various epistemological perspectives concerning the many ways in which errors and mistakes have been defined and theorized (from Plato to the present), I put forward my synthesis: nowadays cognitive and epistemological emphasis about literary errors is no longer placed on blaming "inappropriate readers", nor in sanctioning "the writer's lies", and not even on blaming "the deceiving text" as a source of error, but the locus of error is transferred to "readability" and to contingent readings.

Barbara Johnson has defined "readability" as *the condition of reading* typical of all literature (i.e., techno-scientific, philosophical and literary): "the already read is that aspect of a text that it must have in common with its reader in order for it to be readable at all." (Johnson 1980, 3; see: Barthes 1974) So, readability is determined by previous readability: it is the reader's "already read" which creates the reading possibility.

Based on the unavoidable condition of *readability*, particular *readings* can take place. In this sense, reading is a restricted hermeneutical engagement with a text previously defined (i.e., once readability makes it available as a text). In other words: readability makes a "text" recognizable as the object of a reading. So, literary texts are created by the readers' gaze, and readability is the very condition for the perception of a "text", not as something always already structured, but rather, as readable, and recognizable by different readings, as literary, or alternatively, as scientific, and/or philosophical.

In short: there is no "literary text" per se, but readability makes it so.

Readability as the defining approach to literature does not list empirical "rules" for reading, and yet it *develops forms of understanding* that register and/or promote:

1) the formalist distinction opposing "poetic" to "ordinary" discourse;

2) the readers' reception history, as phenomenological, psychological, social, etc. (highlighting cultural protocols impacting reading attitudes);

3) the literary canon as the mark of an aesthetic tradition (in the case of the literary text).

In any case, as I have said, it would be the gaze of the reader that ultimately determines whether a text counts as Literature, or literature (based on recognized literariness and/or protocols of reading). It is his/her "read-*ability*" which ultimately qualifies a text as literary, and/or scientific, and/or philosophical. This "read(ing)-ability" should not ignore the formal traits of literariness and a tradition of textual protocols of reading, but should take them into account in order to avoid macroscopic interpretive errors and mistakes.

In this light, the *co-textual implications* of texts become pragmatically and theoretically very important. Co-texts are not only the specifically quoted or culturally recognized texts in a later text (as most traditional definitions would maintain); more radically, they are also experiences of reading implicated and in-scribed in the condition of reading (Locatelli 2000). *Reading co-textually*, i.e., in relation to "the already read", can even expand unexpressed methodological and cognitive procedures for renewing and expanding readability itself.

Readability and reading always magnetically attract each other, but they can never coincide: one is the condition of reading; the other is the unstoppable semio-pragmatic effect of readability. At the very "space of the moment" in which readability becomes reading, (because writing, readability and reading irreducibly imply space-time),[11] differences between techno-scientific, literary and philosophical discourses are distinguished. Thus, traditional diatribes on error location in Literature can resurface, regarding the referential "truth" of different references and the "correctness" of the provisional readings of literary texts.

8. Contingent and Concluding Corollaries: Wondering and Wandering

As I have said, when we read a text *as* Literature, our reading choice makes it Literature. So, once this reading decision is made, is there an error potential in making such a determination? Could errors and mistakes occur in the reading possibility and in the performative reading (i.e., in defining a text as Literature, and then in interpreting it)? And can the pragmatic reading identify errors within the texts *qua* texts of Literature? Through these questions, I am highlighting here two levels and two possibilities of error: one depending on the reader's determination of the text, and one intrinsic to the text itself. The reader can go wrong in the description of the text (i.e., qualifying it as Literature when it is not Literature, thus ignoring the logic of the text's narrative world); the text can go wrong by contradicting its own fictional system (structurally and/or referentially). For example, a "faulty" sonnet structure, or contradictory descriptions and chronotopes within the same narrative are blatant textual mistakes. They should be seen as a "mistake", rather than "error", by the practice of reading, inasmuch as they are linked to "inattention and clumsiness." (see: Bondio and Bagliani 2012, VII)

As Barthes suggested, a "symbolic intensity" changes within the movement "from Work to Text" and produces different expectations and responses. So, errors relate to a lack of apprehension of the symbolic dimension of narratives, especially when a "Text" is taken for a "Work" (and vice-versa) because a certain reading does not register the symbolic density at stake.

As Barthes indicated, the "Text" can sometimes challenge rather than sanction the predictable concatenation of ordinary causative theories and hypotheses, notwithstanding the need for syntax as the basic logic of any readable text. For example, within the literary field, I am thinking of "fantasy" and of "transhumanist fictions" as the creations of narrative worlds alternative to the "real world" as conceived by a humanist framework of reference (see: Jackson 1981; Atwood 2003; Houllebecq 2000). In recent times, affective narratology has highlighted the fact that emotional transportation ensuing from literary narrations works on a logic that is strongly divergent from the logic of techno-scientific narrative, and the individual has a much stronger power of persuasion than the statistical one. In other words, scientific evidence and literary exempla produce emotional responses that do not converge (Jenkins 2001; Gallese and Wojciehowski 2011). So, can one talk about literary emphatic errors? The occurrence seems much more frequent in literature (news and fake news), than in Literature, because the communicative model of a literary "Text" is (conventionally) always already removes the fictional world from the immediate context in which writing and reading take place. The literary imperative of deferring incredulity indicates first of all that one refers to belief (albeit a non-naïve credulity), but not to assessment, so that certain types of errors are avoided.

To conclude: errors can occur in reading, but the obligation of readability, i.e. the debt to a possibility of reading, is not erased by erroneous mis-readings, since readability is a non-negotiable requirement of reading itself. The already read makes the specific read-able possible (and this applies to both text and reader), but it cannot guarantee the correctness of specific typological readings. Once the "suspension of disbelief" is achieved, and the dislocation of the referential context is achieved, only mistakes are left for which the restricted textual readings are responsible.

As Samuel Beckett said: "there are many ways in which the thing I am trying in vain to read may be tried in vain to be read." This is the life of Literature, but this is also, as my sagacious readers may have noticed, a wrong quotation, and a citational mistake, for which I ask forgiveness to Samuel Beckett and his readers. [12]

Endnotes:

1. Throughout this essay, heuristically and for the sake of clarity, "Literature" will be capitalized when referring only to literary texts as defined in a Formalist tradition, and will not be capitalized ("literature") when referring to any text. See: Jacques Derrida, *Glas*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986); *Writings and Difference*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978); *Acts of Literature*. (New York: Routledge, 1992); Richard Rorty, "Philosophy as a kind of writing." in *New Literary History* Vol. 39, 1, 2008, 101-119; *Philosophy as Poetry*. (Charlotsville: University of Virginia Press, 2016); Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); *What is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. (Minneapolis: Universirty of Minnesota Press, 1983).
2. See, for example: "mistake" and "error" in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); and "errore" and "sbaglio" in *Treccani*. (Roma: Treccani Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1995).

3. Jacques Derrida has deconstructed the dichotomous opposition of orality and writing and has ousted the traditional belief that the origin of writing is in orality. See: *Of iGrammatology*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).
4. I have created a "figure of thought" indicating the inextricable, simultaneous and unavoidable relations of texts, co-texts, and con-texts. Cfr. Carla Locatelli, "Co(n)testi." in *Co(n)texts: Implicazioni testuali*. C. Locatelli, Ed., (Trento: University of Trento Press, 2000), 11-36.
5. I must note in passing that the development of hermetic traditions in different cultures can be seen as a "defense" against indiscriminate fruition and unworthy addressees. Obviously the complexity of this issue cannot be developed in this essay, but seems necessary to mention it.
6. I believe that the Searle-Derrida debate on "speech acts" has highlighted the impossibility of distinguishing between "serious" and "lying" speech-acts. The former's belief that "the maker of an assertion commits himself to the truth of the expressed proposition" is radically challenged by Derrida. See: *New Literary History*, VI, n° 2, Winter 1975, 322. See Also: Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.* (Evanston IL.: Northwestern University Press, 1988).
7. Starting in 2002, Angela Locatelli has developed a sustained reflection on "The Knowledge of Literature" in a 10 Volume Series she has edited. Contributions have been in English and Italian, and from different disciplinary domains: psychology, jurisprudence, phenomenology, rhetoric, philosophy of science, etc.. See: *La conoscenza della letteratura/The Knowledge of Literature*. (Bergamo University Press, Edizioni Sestante, 2002-2011).
8. Roman Jakobson quoted by Boris Eichenbaum in "The Theory of 'The Formal Method'"(1926) in *Russian Formalist Criticism. Four Essays*. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis trans. and eds., (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 107. Emphasis added. See also: Roman Jakobson, *Language in Literature*. Contributors: Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy, Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1987.
9. Among American and British Formalists see: T.S Eliot, *The Sacred Wood*. (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd. 1920); *On Poetry and Poets* (1957). (New York: Octagon Books,1975); Ivor Armstrong. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924). (London/New York: Routledge, 2001); William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1930 and London: Faber & Faber, 2003); John Crowe Ransom, *The World's Body* (1938). (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968); *The New Criticism* (1941), (Westport CT.: Greenwood Press, 1979); Cleanth Brooks, *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (1939). (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965); *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947). (London: Dobson, 1968); William K. Wimsat, *The Verbal Icon. Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (1954), (Lexington: University of Kentuky Press, 1967); Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*. (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1958).
10. In this essay, following Barthes' suggestions "Text" will be capitalized when referring to "Literature," and will not be capitalized in all other cases. Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text." in *Image – Music – Text*. Trans. Stephen Heath. (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), 157-159.
11. I have discussed the the inscription of space-time in language and narrative in: Carla Locatelli, "Rappresentazione, narratività e linguisticità dello spazio." in *Spazi/o. Teoria, rappresentazione, lettura*. Francesca Di Blasio and Carla Locatelli, Eds. (Trento: Università degli Studi di Trento Press, 2006), 3-25.
12. The actual quotation reads: "There are many ways in which the thing I am trying in vain to say may be tried in vain to be said." In: *Disjecta. Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment by Samuel Beckett*, ed. with a Foreword by Ruby Cohn, London, John Calder, 1983, p.144.

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